

AD-A237 061



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# STUDY PROJECT

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RED STAR REFLECTED  
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REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF SOVIET INVOLVEMENT IN  
THE MIDDLE EAST

BY

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USAWC CLASS OF 1991



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91-02211



91 6 14 066

## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION Unclassified			1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS		
2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY			3. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF REPORT Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.		
2b. DECLASSIFICATION / DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE			5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		
4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)			7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION		
6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION U.S. Army War College		6b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable)	7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		
6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013-5050			9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER		
8a. NAME OF FUNDING / SPONSORING ORGANIZATION		8b. OFFICE SYMBOL (If applicable)	10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS		
8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.	TASK NO.	WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.
11. TITLE (Include Security Classification) RED STAR REFLECTED: Regional Perspectives of Soviet Involvement in The Middle East					
12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) Lieutenant Colonel Edward O. Walsh					
13a. TYPE OF REPORT Individual Study		13b. TIME COVERED FROM _____ TO _____		14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) 91 April 15	
15. PAGE COUNT 26					
16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION					
17. COSATI CODES			18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)		
FIELD	GROUP	SUB-GROUP			
19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number) Understanding of the Soviet Role in the Middle East is crucial to U.S. interests in the region. Key to this understanding is the decades-long relationship between the peoples of the region and the Kremlin's representatives, a relationship characterized by clear regional advocacy of self-interests and repeated examples of area independence countering Soviet desires. While Gorbachev was to repudiate many of the unsuccessful Soviet policies of the past, the latest Gulf War between Iraq and the U.S.-led Coalition forces once again confirms the long history of regional rejection of Kremlin Middle East goals and interests.					
20. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS			21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION		
22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL WAYNE A. SILKETT, LTC, IN			22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) 717-245-3032		22c. OFFICE SYMBOL AWCAC

USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

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Red Star Reflected:  
Regional Perspectives of Soviet Involvement In  
The Middle East

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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Accession For	
Final Report	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
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Availability Codes	
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## Abstract

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TITLE: Red Star Reflected: Regional Perspectives of Soviet  
Involvement In The Middle East

FORMAT: Individual Study Project Intended for Publication

DATE: 15 April 1991 Pages: 26 Classification: Unclassified

Understanding of the Soviet Role in the Middle East is crucial to U.S. interests in the region. Key to this understanding is the decades-long relationship between the peoples of the region and the Kremlin's representatives, a relationship characterized by clear regional advocacy of self-interests and repeated examples of area independence countering Soviet desires. While Gorbachev was to repudiate many of the unsuccessful Soviet policies of the past, the latest Gulf War between Iraq and the U.S.-led Coalition forces once again confirms the long history of regional rejection of Kremlin Middle East goals and interests.

## INTRODUCTION

Middle Eastern attitudes toward Soviet involvement have shaped Soviet foreign policy in the area quite independently from the Kremlin's foreign policy intentions. The bankrupt system offered by Moscow, as we shall see, was to almost never be accepted in the Kremlin's dealings in the region, and was to reflect an increasing regional distaste for the Soviet variety of foreign policy intrusion throughout 1948-1990. Although we shall see some regional governments temporarily embrace Russian export brands of Marxism-Leninism, by March 1991 virtually all states in the region had left the Communist Camp. Yet, while the rise and fall of Soviet fortunes is a recent area of interest to Western observers of the bipolar Cold War era, what is not always clear in the post-World War II record of Soviet Middle East involvement is the chart of regional power assertiveness rather than Soviet blundering.

From our present vantage point following Soviet-equipped Iraq's ignominious defeat at the hands of the U.S.-led coalition, recent seemingly surprising Soviet failures actually continue a decades-long trend of Soviet manipulation by regional peoples, rather than some sort of sudden tactical blunder. As we trace Moscow's repeated exploitation by regional powers in pre-Gorbachev Soviet moves in the region, we will find quite complete confirmation that regional interests were, in the end, to triumph over the Kremlin's.

There were five themes to these very nearly one-sided relationships. We shall see the strength of area (not necessarily Arab) nationalism as a fuel for initiating Middle Eastern desire for power in the post-World War II period, power which in the Arab case of cultural necessity, must find its expression through force of arms, as seen in the Egyptian-Soviet experience. Secondly, the force of Islamic fundamentalism, coupled with cultural antecedent antagonism, is to fly in the face of Soviet Marxist-Leninist progress in Afghanistan. In the moderate Arab states, particularly the oil-rich peninsular monarchies, we shall see in the main decades-long rejection of all things Soviet, until Gorbachev's foreign policy impact is to find a short-lived success in the late 1980s; this rejection we will see as self-serving. Moscow's diplomatic fortunes are to temporarily rise only when it suits these capitalist countries during the congruence of Kremlin hard currency needs and Arab thirst for military might. Finally, we will see single-minded disregard by Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, for Soviet goals and interests. Developing socioeconomic trends toward capitalism, coupled with monarchical strength, will oppose Kremlin efforts, while the waning force of anti-Israeli Arab opinion will undermine much of the Soviet Middle Eastern diplomatic stance.

This construct, then, is to reflect the decades-long regional Soviet experience in selected countries of the Middle East; an experience that offers a nearly unbroken record of exploitation of Moscow, rather than the reverse. It is the

record of a remarkably independent region, whose self-interests are to push the Soviet presence to an historic low, and it is at once a blueprint of independent self-assertion as well as a warning for non-regional power involvement in the future.

#### SOVIET INTERESTS

Post-World War II Kremlin motivations in the Middle East were driven by a relatively consistent interest pattern. Ideologically, Moscow attempted to interface with traditional "states of socialist orientation" in the region throughout the 1980-1985 period. This was to limit pre-Gorbachev Soviet friendship primarily to radical states such as Syria, South Yemen, and Iraq, while Egypt was to flirt sufficiently with socialism to become lavished with Soviet attention.

Militarily, traditional Russian border security worries were high on Moscow's interest priorities, as proximity to the Soviet Union was in itself to motivate Soviet moves in the region. Secondly, Moscow sought ports and bases from which to counter Western bipolar presence in the region. Finally, the Kremlin was to use its Middle Eastern arms deals to generate its voracious needs for hard currency.

#### ARAB-SOVIET BACKGROUND

Arab views of the Soviet Union are strongly rooted in the history of the Middle East, as are Moscow's current interests and involvement. Nineteenth-century Tsarist Russian expansion

extended to the Iranian border, with subsequent unwelcome Russian involvement in the affairs of its Persian neighbor. By 1908, as a result of British-Russian interests in the area, Iran found herself carved up into British and Tsarist spheres of influence, and Tsarist troops stood on Iranian soil. Lenin was to renounce all treaties after the Bolshevik Revolution; the Gulf area became less a military focus for Russian regimes until World War II, when Operation Barbarossa spurred Stalin to link arms with Great Britain.

With Russian entry into World War II, once again Russian troops appeared on Middle Eastern soil, in a replay of the 1907 Russian-British agreement that was this time to last until 1945, when the British met the terms of an Occupation Agreement with the young Shah of Iran, and withdrew their forces. The Soviets, true to form for the post-WW II period, did not, and held fast with military formations in northern Iran. An international crisis of Cold War dimensions resulted, with the United Nations Security Council playing a part in final Soviet withdrawal. This withdrawal included a "buyout" of the monetarily hard-pressed Russians, as an agreement was struck establishing a joint Soviet-Iranian oil company. Although the commercial agreement came to no consequence, it did presage the later actions of the Middle Eastern countries in bartering interests with the superpowers.<sup>1</sup>



## ARABS AND SOVIET TOOLS OF WAR

To speak of the post-World War II Arab and Middle Eastern view of the Soviet vision is to speak of Soviet military involvement in terms of arms sales, advisors, and Moscow-taught military education. While encouragement of Marxist regimes was ideologically a goal of the pre-Gorbachev era, the peoples with whom the Kremlin dealt were to judge the values and extent of the Soviet commitment by and large through the medium of shared interests. From 1950 until the U.S.-led Coalition War with Soviet-supplied Iraq, the dialogue between Middle Eastern/Arab countries and Moscow was to be expressed in arms deals, a characteristic of the region.

In the Arab world, cultural history includes a deep current of aggressive conflict, rooted in the communal interface of warring tribal societies. The measure of worth for the peoples who sprang from the harsh climates of much of the area lay in their ability to survive the competition for scarce resources in a hostile land. "More often than not," says Sania Hamady, "the reigning relationship between groups is that of hatred and enmity."<sup>2</sup> In the Arab-Israeli confrontation, for example, it is essential to note that for Muslims to embark on ijihad:

The importance. . . lies in shifting the focus of attention of the tribes from their inter-tribal warfare to the outside world; the Prophet Mohammad preached peace among the restless and unquiet tribes of the desert. He required them to obey the rules of a central government of Medina. What a difficult task would it have been for the authorities of that government to let those tribes live peacefully side by side? We can safely say that the very existence of the state would have been in danger, had it not been for

the farsighted policy of Abu-Bakr to direct that enormous energy...from an inevitable internal conflict to unite and fight against the common enemy of the new faith.<sup>3</sup>

While most modern, well-educated Arabs would probably not think the above still at work, nor is it the intention of this writing to prove the thesis, the almost constant state of war in the Middle East has been a fact for decades, to include the jihads called for in 1991 by Saudi religious leaders against Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and the Soviets' own experience at the hands of the Afghan rebels.

The point is that military strength in the Middle East is of itself a vital interest for much of the leadership of the Middle East, and was so at the time the Soviet's great military-industrial machine was first introduced to the region. A congruence of interests was to develop that was not significantly lessened even by the Gorbachev regime: the Soviets traded arms for a variety of interests, and the Middle Eastern countries were buying.

At all events, the Arab experience with Soviet arms after Stalin's post-war occupation of Iran was to begin in the early 1950s. Until that time, arms exports to the region were at relatively low levels. With Khrushchev's accession to Kremlin leadership, the pace quickened. In the exchange which became known as the "Czech arms deal," Egypt signalled willingness to barter with the Soviet Union, while the Soviets sought to break

years of Western monopoly over arms exports to the area.<sup>4</sup> Further, it showed that Arab nationalism, together with the Arab-Israeli issue, was liable to purposefully pursue military strength to achieve its aims. From 1954 to 1971, \$8.6 billion in Russian military aid went to less-developed countries like Egypt, while Soviet economic aid added another \$7.9 billion.<sup>5</sup> Soviet arms were acquired by the Iraqi military leaders, while Khrushchev cultivated the Imam in Yemen and countered, cold-war fashion, the increasing Iranian ties with the United States by shipping the Shah some limited numbers of arms.<sup>6</sup> The Arab appetite for military equipment increased in the following years, and Yemeni Republican forces received Soviet aid and arms during the Yemen Civil War.

Meanwhile, bipolar struggle had fueled formation of the 1955 Baghdad Pact, in which the United States, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey joined with Great Britain in an attempt to limit Soviet expansion in the region.<sup>7</sup> Other Arab countries, continuing a trend, saw benefits to be gained from joining the Soviet camp: Syria, Yemen, and Egypt concluded military arms deals with Moscow, while Iraq was to lean towards Soviet arms somewhat later.<sup>8</sup> Egypt's drive for military might, coupled with irritation with Western restrictions on military aid, support for Israel, and the vestiges of British and French colonialism, adroitly obtained aid from the USSR and the West during the Suez War. Egypt's Nasser, however, was to emerge from the experience seeing the Soviet Union as supporting the Arab cause against Britain, France, and Israel.

Before the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Arab pro-Soviet attitudes grew to an all-time high. Seemingly, the Soviets were held in high esteem, while the U.S. camp was practically viewed as the enemy.<sup>9</sup>

#### SOVIET STATURE PLUMMETS

The 1967 war was to end a period of high Arab confidence in Moscow. Some observers have said that from that point on, Middle Eastern countries were never again to see the Soviets as other than rigidly unwilling or incapable of assisting the Arab cause.<sup>10</sup> That the Arab states continued to receive massive amounts of Soviet aid from 1967 to 1973 was irrelevant to Arab public consciousness, pointing only to the futility of subsequent Soviet aid. In fact, from the 1967 war on, Arab states were largely to go their own way, a trend which Rashid Khalidi has postulated was probably inevitable, where socioeconomic forces matured the Arab societies toward the capitalist camp.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, those Arab states with the highest levels of dependency upon Soviet military assistance through 1982 demonstrated repeatedly their great independence from Moscow. Egypt, at one fell swoop, ejected thousands of Soviet advisors, immediately after which Damascus and Cairo launched the 1973 attack on Israel, largely ignoring Soviet desires to the contrary. Sadat's action was representative of the Arab view that the Russian bear was rigid, timid, and not to be trusted;

little wonder, then, the uncereemonious dumping of Sadat's Soviet advisors. So-called close ties (in some cases outright dependency) in the military aid sense was a Soviet failure in the face of these Arab actions.

If we look at the quantity of military aid to the Middle Eastern States (Table 1), note that Egypt, Iraq, and Syria for the 1973-1985 period have the highest military dependency on the Soviets. Yet, Cairo and Damascus went their own way in 1973, as Baghdad was to in 1990. Overall, a poor testimonial to Soviet arms deals in terms of client behavior. "Minimal regard for Soviet interests. . ." as Goodman and Ekedahl have put it, along with a continuing habit of "...following their own domestic and foreign policies..." seem to have always been the order of the day.<sup>12</sup>

TABLE 1 <sup>13</sup>  
RANK ORDER OF MIDDLE EASTERN STATES  
IN PERCENT OF USSR ARMS IMPORTS

	<u>\$ Million</u>	<u>Percent</u>
SOUTH YEMEN	654	96.4
AFGHANISTAN	717	95.4
EGYPT	13,111	89.4
SYRIA	12,064	84.4
IRAQ	38,489	58.5
LIBYA	13,411	58.2
YEMEN	1,496	45.0
IRAN	68,241	8.9
KUWAIT	8,010	5.8
LEBANON	1,207	4.3
JORDAN	5,293	3.8

No strong connection can be made between amount of Soviet aid and a sort of client state obedience. What is significant here is that Afghanistan, near the top of the list at better than 96 percent, has nevertheless caused the Soviets perhaps the most problems. Egypt and Syria went against Soviet restraint in 1973, Iraq in 1990. Newly-unified Yemen doesn't look much like a client state either (although the jury is still out).

#### 1980-1991: REGIONAL INTERESTS CONTINUE TO ECLIPSE THE RED STAR

The Arab experience with the Soviet Union was to enter a new stage with three events that would further confirm the Arab/Middle Eastern independence from the Soviet Union: the Iran-Iraq War, the Soviet Afghan withdrawal, and the U.S.-led coalition victory over Iraq. Relevant to these regional developments was superimposed the world-shaking impact of the Gorbachev Era, which saw Moscow's retreat from Eastern Europe and internal economic collapse within the Soviet Union, and the Middle Eastern consequences of Gorbachev's New Thinking.

#### IRAN-IRAQ WAR

From early to mid-eighties the armed struggle between Tehran and Baghdad was less a measure of changing Arab perceptions toward the Soviet Union than a clear signal that once again the Arab nations were perfectly capable of following their own interests independently from superpower desires, continuing the Egyptian/Syrian example of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This

time, however, both adversaries were Arab; further, both possessed a strong bargaining chip with which to deal with the Soviets: oil. And finally, it fostered among the nonwarring Middle East States the increased growth of regionalism, counter to Soviet desires.<sup>14</sup>

Arab oil deals with the Kremlin during the Iran-Iraq War contended with the increasing Soviet demand for hard currency. In the case of Iraq, oil was directly exchanged for arms, which Moscow then in a trilateral (and doubly profitable) move sold on the world market for hard currency. This continued during Gorbachev's rise to power, but the Arabs and other regional states were to continue independent advancement of their own interests.

The Iran-Iraq War obviously caused discordant relations between Soviet Arab client states, but what worried the Soviets perhaps most was the increase in regionalism, particularly in the form of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which had as its only welcome trend a tendency to be anti-Western prior to Saddam's 1990 Kuwait misadventures. Additionally, the Soviets viewed with alarm a new pattern of Arab friendships which began during the hostilities between Tehran and Baghdad. All this, as Carol Saivetz points out, took away from the central fuel of the Kremlin Middle East involvement in a bipolar world: the Arab-Israeli dispute, which Soviet propaganda had, until the close of the 1980s, emphasized as an anti-U.S. matter.<sup>15</sup>

## NEW THINKING IN THE REGION

Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985 saw the reversal of Soviet fortunes in Afghanistan, while the Iran-Iraq War caused destabilization and regionalism. But, after decades of nearly fruitless Kremlin efforts in the Middle East, Gorbachev signaled a new approach to the region which was to alter the look of the Soviet Bear in Arab eyes. At the 27th Party Congress in February 1986, the Soviet leader indicated a turning away from the expensive and unsuccessful efforts of his predecessors: during his remarks, he followed his momentous domestic economic proposals with the statement that "our activity in the sphere of foreign economic contacts must be tied up more closely with the new domestic tasks. There should be a large-scale forward-looking approach to mutually advantageous relations."<sup>16</sup> He said nothing of Brezhnev's "regimes of socialist orientation;" rather, he referred to an earlier 1985 Report to the Central Committee to Lenin, which called for economic achievement as the only path to World Socialist influence.<sup>17</sup> This was welcome news to the Arab moderates.

Gorbachev was to continue to curry favor with the moderate states of the Region throughout the late 1980s; meanwhile oil for arms deals driven by Soviet hard currency needs continued as foundations of Gulf State relations. In the Middle East perspective, as we have seen, arms are viewed as a virtual necessity, and are antecedent to understanding regional aspirations. The fundamentalist threat shown by Iran and other



groups in the area has resulted in self-preservation-driven independence from superpower relations in the region. Prior to the latest Gulf War with Iraq, however, Gorbachev's new thinking (coupled, no doubt, with some desire for new Soviet arms deals) saw the Soviet activities in the area generally looked on with favor. In late 1987, Atef Gawad saw increased acceptance of the Soviets, particularly in Kuwait City, Tehran, and Riyadh, where

...Soviet cooperation with Iran on the one hand and...Saudi Arabia and Kuwait on the other appears to be growing. One reason for this is the fact that Moscow's Middle Eastern experts, who enjoy a high profile in the Kremlin, seem to have identified, correctly, how the new realities in the region, oil and Islam, have...joined strategic factors as determinants of Soviet foreign policy in the Middle East.<sup>18</sup>

With the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan, Moscow enjoyed a brief period of welcome in heretofore hostile capitals. Kuwait had established diplomatic relations originally in 1963, and afterwards frequently called for her neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, to do likewise: She pointed to the trouble-free presence of the Soviet Embassy (little knowing that Soviet-built Iraqi tanks were to run over the tiny country in 1990). With the Soviet New Thinking, the leadership of Oman, the UAR, Qatar, and Bahrain followed suit, Riyadh resuming diplomatic relations in September 1990. That accomplished, New Thinking had therefore been regionally more accepted between 1985 and the beginning of 1991 in the moderate Gulf States than had any Soviet dealings in the previous three decades.<sup>20</sup> Why this was so was the favorable regional response to two Soviet actions: troop

withdrawal from Eastern Europe and Soviet abandonment of single-minded attention to Marxist ideology.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the Gorbachev decision which most advanced Soviet stature among regional nations was the Soviet pullout from Afghanistan. The Soviet Army had suffered reverses of heroic proportions; in the Afghan-Soviet struggle can be seen a classic confrontation offering a lesson in regional self-interest. Because of its extraordinary face-off between ideology and religion, clash of cultures, and total rejection of the Soviet involvement, it would be well to examine why the Kremlin effort failed so miserably, leading Gorbachev to cut his losses and initiate the pullout.

#### POLITBURO ISLAMIC WORRIES

Before the 1970s, Islamic fundamentalism did not seriously present a problem for Arab-Soviet relations. While the Saudis, partly motivated by their role as caretakers of the Holy Shrines, shunned relations with the Soviets, Moscow managed in the main to avoid direct confrontation whenever possible. This very careful avoidance of Islamic issues in international relations with the Middle East-Gulf region was to quite suddenly end, however, in three near-calamitous events thrust forward by the Arabs, and refocusing the Politburo's attention: the Iranian Shi'i-led war against largely Sunni-governed and more secular Iraq; Sadat's assassination by Islamic-oriented zealots; and Syrian ally Hassad's problems with an Islamic faction known as the Muslim

Brotherhood. The war forced the Soviets into an unwelcome role of fence-sitting, with eventual leanings toward Iraq, which Moscow would later regret. While Assad was to retain his rule, the Syrian episode was to prove troublesome enough that, as we will see, the Soviets found attractive later Kremlin movement away from radical bilateral relationships, and the forging of new diplomatic bonds with moderate Gulf States in the 1980s. More importantly, this Islamic threat to Syria directly impacted upon the Soviets' hard-won military installations, a major Soviet interest in the area.<sup>22</sup> Closer on the Soviet border, though, was an ever-bigger Islamic threat: ethnic and Islamic rebellion in Afghanistan. Coupled with the events above, Moscow was to act imprudently and tarnish the Red Star in regional eyes as never before.

#### JIHAD AND MARX: THE AFGHANI REVERSAL

The case of Afghanistan marks the ultimate rejection of the pre-Gorbachev Soviet impact on the Middle Eastern world, and as it is an exceptional watershed, merits our attention. While many were the failures of the Soviets in the Middle East from the 1950s until New Thinking, here on the borders of the Soviet Union was a reversal of heroic proportions: a military defeat, a political black eye, and glaring example of Islamic independent spirit. It has been said that in the surprising Afghani resistance to the Soviet brand of communism can be seen the clearest example of the triumph of Islamic opposition.<sup>23</sup> Probably a chief reason for this somewhat extreme failure is that

the Afghanis were successfully integrating modernized Islamic thinking with historical antecedent typology, while the Soviets seemingly reflected little understanding of the cultural "buzz-saw" into which they thrust their ideology, their troops, and ultimately, their prestige at home and abroad.

During the Middle Eastern Colonial Period in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, native peoples in the Afghan area met either Tsarist or British governmental representatives. Like Muslims elsewhere,<sup>24</sup> what they saw before them were closely advanced societies in terms of material wealth, but cloaked in the unacceptable trappings of infidel enemies. While some saw modernization as a key to survival, the majority remained firmly anchored in the Islamic tradition of the past. This divergence was to generate decades of complex problems in West Turkestan for Tsarist and Soviet leadership, and lead to repeated incidents of oppressive, heavy-handed clampdowns, which became well-known to the Afghanis, and became a part of the Afghani attitude toward their Soviet neighbors. So well-known was this West Turkestan oppression, that following the 1979 invasion the memoirs of the last Emir of Bukhara were published widely among the resistance leaders, along with radio broadcasts emphasizing the similarities between the fate of the two peoples.<sup>25</sup>

Ideologically, the Soviets were up against another misunderstood Afghani strength: so-called "revolutionary Islamic" organizations. These groups proved to be impossibly

resistant to Soviet instruments of political change. These organizations, by presenting acceptably faithful Islamic precepts, remained well within the boundaries of awakening technological, cultural, and governmental modernization. Therefore, Afghani societal reformist and intellectual leaders had a culturally acceptable alternative to secular communism. Given that many of these people had become disenchanted with traditional practices, and were a group from which the Soviets would need to draw ideological support, Kremlin representatives were chagrined to find instead almost impossible intransigence. The total impact of this fundamentalist ideological brick wall was another political construct which more than successfully vied with the Soviet political product.<sup>26</sup> In the end, the Soviets were unable to successfully deal with this important obstacle, other than to remove themselves as a visible, and unifying, infidel opponent.

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan, a debacle of no small political moment, is therefore not a lesson in the Western sense of nationalism or power politics; rather, it is the impact of a nonsecular jihad, spurred with Afghani understanding of Turkestan history.<sup>27</sup> It was to confirm the Kremlin's fears of nonsecular opposition in the Middle East, while moderate Arab states were to cast a wary eye on their Soviet neighbor, a mistrust that only Gorbachev's New Thinking was to somewhat assuage with the Moscow pullout.

## REGIONAL POLITICAL INTERFACE WITH MOSCOW

Arab/Middle Eastern political interface with the Soviet state has never been up to the expectations of the pre-Gorbachev Kremlin, with the possible Yemeni exception discussed below. While Western observers might have feared communist revolutionary fervor to threaten the region in the 1950s and 1960s, this was not to occur.

In what was formerly North Yemen, worries of the neighboring conservative Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, about Soviet-sponsored Marxism in the Arabian Peninsula proved in the long run to be unsupported. The most strongly supported revolution in terms of Soviet military equipment was the "Marxist" revolution in North Yemen in 1972, which turned out to be non-Marxist. With some 13 million people, unified Yemen in 1990 became the most populist state on the Arab peninsula, and a fledgling multi-party democracy.<sup>28</sup> When questioned about the future of Soviet involvement in Yemen, Soviet officials darkly evade the subject entirely.<sup>29</sup>

Marxist insurrections in Oman (1965-1975) were failures as well. It is no wonder that the pre-Gorbachev Soviets were extremely critical of the tiny Gulf State, for the Sultan had repeatedly ignored vocal Soviet displeasure at the long-standing presence of British military officers in his armed forces. Before Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the Sultan was known to be the most vocal critic of the USSR on the Arabian

Peninsula.<sup>30</sup> Omani rejection of the Soviet camp included lingering bitterness about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, activities on the Horn of Africa, and Russian presence in South Yemen. Like the Saudis, the Sultan's Soviet concerns included Moscow's prior efforts to encourage domestic opponents of Gulf States like his own and other Arab conservatives. The pre-Gorbachev Arab acceptance of Soviet influence on the Arab Peninsula was a closed door, except for South Yemen.

The case of the Yemeni-Soviet relationship may be the one example of Kremlin Middle East adventures which has not come to ruin--however, the jury is still out as to the newly-unified state's coming relations with the Soviets. A long history of almost total dependence (See Table 1) upon the Soviet Union for military assistance characterized the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), particularly after a 1978 coup installed a clique with pro-Moscow leanings.<sup>31</sup> And yet, Yemen remains almost the only Middle Eastern state where a military aid package is not the chief reason for close ties with Moscow; rather, the coincidence of interests on political/ideological levels (the Yemeni Socialist Party appeared after the coup), apparently gave the Soviets entree.<sup>32</sup> Airfield and basing rights on Socotra and at Aden gave the Soviets potential for sea interdiction of Red Sea and Persian Gulf traffic. In addition, the PDRY permitted the Soviets a regional base for weapons transshipment; pre-Gorbachev radical group assistance for elements like the Japanese Red Army, PLO, and Spanish Basque

terrorists; aid to Omani rebels in the Dhofar province; and supported large weapons airlifts to Ethiopia in 1977-78.<sup>33</sup> All this, however, was before the May 1990 unification of North and South Yemen, and while information is sketchy regarding the present Yemeni attitude, as well as Soviet intentions, indications are that the situation has become more complex for Moscow.<sup>34</sup>

#### AFTER THE BALL:

##### ARABS AND SOVIETS IN THE 1990s

While the Soviet Union's post-World War II involvement in the Middle East has been reflective of its interests in the region and while these interests can be quite clearly documented by Soviet foreign policy, it is equally clear that, from the standpoint of most Arab countries in the region, the Soviets were never to realize success in the area. Indeed, comparing Soviet goals and interests with those of the region's Arab governmental ambitions shows an ever-increasing failure of Soviet Middle East foreign policy, and an asymmetrical interface that was doomed largely to failure from the start of its 45-year history.

These failures were in the main to be recognized by the Gorbachev Kremlin, while the instruments and goals of Soviet foreign policy were to be altered and redirected following Gorbachev's rise to power. But the sins of Khrushchev and Brezhnev were nevertheless to be visited upon even the visionary new Soviet leader, and the expanding catalog of limited Soviet



foreign policy success under Gorbachev was to be defeated under the high-tech guns of the U.S.-led coalition in the sands of Iraq and Kuwait. It can be argued that the peoples of the Middle East took from the Russian Bear the best it had to offer, but found the political and material product unacceptable to their own self-interest. What has happened in the Middle East-Soviet experience since the Second World War is a repetitive chronicle not so much of Soviet blunders, as a reflection of the manifestly independent self-interest of the regional peoples and their culture. In the final analysis, the Soviet Union tangled nonsecular ideology with potent Islam, hawked the wares of socialist values in the face of advancing historical self-interest and growing regional nationalism, and was to be no more accepted in the Middle East than within its own borders. The assertions of Arab Nationalism, socioeconomic trends toward capitalism, and the resulting asymmetrical interest conflict leave the Soviet Union a failed player on the regional stage. Most of Gorbachev's advances were to be reversed when Iraqi Soviet-advised and Soviet-equipped forces suffered one of the great defeats of history. In a repeat of the 1967 and 1973 Soviet arms embarrassments, Moscow's image has hit rock-bottom.

Some observers who chose to chronicle the increased Soviet access to the region before the U.S.-led Coalition shooting war saw the tide of Middle East sentiment turning. They saw also that relations between the conservative Gulf States and Moscow, along with Soviet-Israeli rapprochement, were clearly the best

ever: "Moscow's gains in just two months provided the Soviet Union with greater access to the Middle East than at any time in the post-World War II era," said Robin Wright in October of last year.<sup>35</sup> At this time she was exactly right. But given that Moscow's hard currency needs are greater than ever,<sup>36</sup> and that few Soviet exports other than arms sales are of sufficient quality to generate dollars better than arms sales, Iraq's defeat may permanently relegate the Kremlin's future regional role to political interface. Surely, hundreds of Soviet military officers and technicians who have made a career advising Iraq and others on Soviet equipment must now be embarrassed, if not in total disgrace; we may expect little regional desire for Kremlin arms sales in the future as a result.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, we may expect the Soviet Union to embrace restricted arms proliferation among regional powers as the only face-saving practical short-term reality. But in the long run, the Soviet Red Star will find its Middle Eastern image a tarnished one.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Carol R. Saivetz, The Soviet Union And The Gulf In The 1980's, pp. 1-2.
2. Sania Hamady, Temperament and Character of the Arabs, p. 40.
3. Ibid., p. 42.
4. Alexander J. Bennet, "Arms Transfer As An Instrument of Soviet Foreign Policy In The Middle East," Middle East Journal, Autumn 1985, p. 748.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 746.
7. Ibid.
8. Rashid Khalidi, "Arab Views of the Soviet Role In The Middle East," Middle East Journal, Autumn 1985, p. 717.
9. Ibid., p. 718.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., p. 719.
12. Melvin A. Goodman and Carolyn M. Ekedahl, "Gorbachev's New Directions In The Middle East," Middle East Journal, Autumn 1988, p. 572.
13. Bennet, p. 746.
14. Khalidi, p. 717.
15. Saivetz, p. 71.
16. Peter Shearman, "Gorbachev and the Third World," Third World Quarterly, p. 1083.
17. Ibid., pp. 1084-1085.
18. Atef Gawad, "How the Gulf Was Won: Oil and Islam in Soviet Foreign Policy," Arab American Affairs, Fall 1987, p. 62.
19. Ibid.
20. Hermann F. Eilts, "The Persian Gulf Crisis: Perspectives and Prospects," Middle East Journal, Winter 1991, p. 13.

21. Ibid., p. 12.
22. Eden Naby, "The Concept of Jihad In Opposition to Communist Rule: Turkestan and Afgharistan, Studies In Comparative Communism, Autumn/Winter 1986, p. 298.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., p. 290. The examples referred to are those similar to the Middle Eastern experience reflective of the colonial hegemony of 19th and 20th Century North Africa, India, and the Caucasus.
25. Ibid., p. 299.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., p. 288.
28. "Just One Yemen," Economist, May 26, 1990, p. 45.
29. During his visit to the Army War College on 13 March 1991, General-Major Vladimer Slipchenko of the Soviet Genreal Staff Academy curtly refused to comment on the current Yemen-Soviet situation, although he was forthcoming on many other topics. Again later that month, the author had occasion to meet socially in Moscow with two Soviet military attachees on 28 March: there was similar reluctance in an otherwise open conversation.
30. Saivetz, p. 72.
31. Bennet, p. 753.
32. Ibid., p. 754.
33. Ibid., p. 755.
34. See note 28 above.
35. Robin Wright, "Unexplored Realities of the Persian Gulf Crisis," Middle East Journal, Winter 1991, p. 28.
36. As of this writing, Moscow has revalued its ruble downward from approximately six rubles per U.S. dollar to thirty rubles per dollar effective 3 April 1991.
37. See also Galia Golan, "Gorbachev's Middle East Strategy," Foreign Affairs, Fall 1987; the author predicted consequences of an Iraqi defeat at Iranian hands in many ways similar to Saddam's 1991 military rout at the hands of the U.S.-led coalition.

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